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On Earth As It Is

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Practice

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on earth as it is

prayer as story, story as prayer

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photo by matthew simmons

Practice

Ray Vukcevic

Meditation is hard. You try, you fail. There is that straight spine business, and the folding of the legs, and the breathing -- in and out, in and out, and the way words just keep poking their noses into your mental tent, dragging your attention away from the movement of air through one nostril or the other, sometimes both, all the aches and pains to ignore or embrace. Yes, it's a struggle, but the rewards are great -- the control of time itself, the wonderful realization that all the moments of your existence don't necessarily occur in any particular order. In fact, only this one occurs at all, and what do you mean by "moment" anyway? The word tickles your nose with a feather. You want to open your eyes. You try to blow away the feather with a small stream of air from your mouth. No good. You sneeze.

And that, as they say, is that. You are done for the day. You are so bad at this. It is so hard. You will probably skip it tomorrow.

But now here is a new technique that will change your life. You might not achieve Mindfulness right away, but you will know you are on the right track. You will see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Ready?

First, it doesn't much matter how you sit.

And forget about folding your legs. No pretzel legs for you. All pressure to master the lotus position is gone. That balloon has popped!

Next, you must pick the right chewing gum. This is not an easy thing, so approach the question with a high degree of seriousness. What you want is something long lasting but not endless. You want a flavor that is interesting but mature. Any flavor that reminds you of your childhood is to be avoided. We are so lucky to be living in a time and place with so many flavors of chewing gum. Pause to fully appreciate and be grateful for finding yourself living here now. Oh, I know, I know, you're actually not here now yet, but you soon will be!

You should set up a special area for this practice featuring a comfortable chair and a small table. Take one piece of gum from the package and place it on the table. Gaze down at the gum and

admire your work. Be the gum, be the table. Do this forever. OK, OK, that won't be possible at this point, and that is OK.

Sit down in the chair. You can put your feet up if it's that kind of chair. Remember, there is nothing whatever special about sitting. Just sit down and forget about it.

Reach to your left or your right for the gum on the table. Think about why you put the table on the left or the right. Maybe one day you will do it the other way. Unwrap the gum and leave the wrapper on the table.

Put the gum in your mouth.

Close your eyes.

Chew.

Notice the taste. Notice the sound. The squish squish squish so much like the surf being forced up between the dock and where the dock is secured to the land when the tide moves in and out in and out in the south of France last summer. Notice how you shift the gum from one side of your mouth to the other. Notice your teeth. Don't think about any of these things, just notice them, and keep chewing. You shouldn't think about the good knight Lancelot who loves to sing and dance a lot in the springtime when all the birds are singing, except for the tough guy crows who absolutely run this neighborhood and don't you forget it, Buster, you who they allow to stroll down the avenue totally clueless about the underlying structure the birds have imposed on the universe. It is only as you chew your gum, chew your gum, that you begin to get a glimmer of the machinery of life here on this island in the dark sea.

Should you smack your lips?

Only when the time is right.

Pay attention to all the little nuances in the sounds you are making, but don't let the voice of your gum resolve itself into words. Your gum is telling you things that cannot be expressed in language. Do not picture yourself riding on a camel.

Maybe your mouth will become Plato's cave, maybe there will be tiny prisoners chained to your teeth, maybe they will be all abuzz over the light that sometimes floods in when you smack your lips. There are no bats in the cave. Your tongue is totally clean of bat droppings. Do not wrinkle your nose.

Do not imagine you are some specific person. Chew away thoughts of him or her who makes your heart flutter and reminds you of wild flowers in a field to one side of the road where the two of you have stopped to be shy with one another all those years ago when what was monumentally important was the distance between the two casual hands on the car seat when car seats were all one thing more like couches than buckets. Think instead of your clean tongue, that clever thing. How is it you don't bite it while chewing gum? You will be tempted to grimace as you chew. You'll want to perform exaggerated open mouth smiles that you can feel high up near your ears. Go ahead. Such stretching can only be good for your health. Not that you should be thinking about your health. Any health benefits you get are strictly side effects.

Notice the flavor is fading some. In fact, it is fading a lot. In fact, it's mostly gone. The gum tastes gray now. You realize that you have not fallen asleep. You think of all those times while struggling with other meditation techniques that you simply fell asleep, deeply if already flat on your back, fitfully if sitting slumped like an abandoned teddy bear, and in either case waking to think that you had once more failed to find Mindfulness. Now, however, you realize that it is difficult to fall asleep while chewing gum. Some part of you knows there is the danger that you would swallow the gum and it would go down the wrong way and you would be gagging and gasping and leaping up and holding your neck with both hands as you run around the room in panic.

Instead, you chew and listen to the sound your boots make hiking in a Florida swamp after a hot rain, and the mosquitoes, and the serious worry about water snakes and alligators. No, no, forget that. There are no alligators in your mouth.

And with that final banishment of the alligators, here it is at last -- your perfect place of peaceful tongue push squash squish shift to the other side and do it again and again. There is no flavor whatever left in the gum. You are thinking no words or pictures or breezes or itches or swampy smells or sounds not coming from your mouth.

You are here now in this comfy chair. Nothing came before, and nothing follows.

Forever.

But, of course, sooner or later, you reach a state where you simply cannot chew that piece of gum any longer. Stand up slowly and stretch up on your toes and lift your arms to heaven. Spit your gum into the wrapper on your special gum meditation table and wad it up and throw it in the trash.

Next time, we will talk about an advanced technique involving walking. Yes, there are difficulties and dangers, but we will overcome them. You are ready to combine your chewing meditation with walking meditation. By the end of the next session, you will be able to do both at the same time! You will need to keep your eyes open.

Ray Vukceovich's new book is *Boarding Instructions* from Fairwood Press. His fiction has appeared in many magazines including *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Night Train*, *Hobart*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and *Polyphony*, and has been collected in *Meet Me in the Moon Room* from Small Beer Press. His first novel is *The Man of Maybe Half-a-Dozen Faces* from St. Martin's. Read more about him at Rayvuk.com.

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